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ABSTRACT

This information analysis discusses the changing role of the principal in light of the growth of standards-based accountability during the decade of the 1990s and into the 21st century. The paper begins with an overview of the expectations of school leaders and the changes in school leadership. This is followed by definitions of school leadership that include professional standards, core practices that seem consistent with the standards, the various roles the principal plays, and some of the common challenges the principal faces in meeting expectations. The next section discusses the dominance of instructional leadership over the past several decades; many educators believe that student learning should be at the center of the principal's role. The remainder of the paper addresses the role of the principal in light of the current reform movement. Topics include the principal as leader in implementing school reform; leadership styles, particularly distributed, or collaborative, leadership; and the principal as moral leader and role model for the school community. (Contains 13 Web sources and 35 references.) (WFA)

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Trends and Issues

Role of the School Leader

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Role of the School Leader

Revised July 2003
By Larry Lashway

Since the beginnings of the principalship in American education, educators have struggled to define a distinctive role for the position. Theoreticians and analysts have repeatedly dissected the job and its place in the larger social and educational context, urging principals in one decade to be "bureaucratic executives" followed ten years later by "humanistic facilitator" and then "instructional leader" (Lynn Beck and Joseph Murphy 1993).

Principals themselves have less time for theoretical debates, but struggle with role definition on a daily basis. How should I spend my time? What do students, teachers, parents, and board members expect of me? What should be at the top of the to-do list?

In the past decade, the growth of standards-based accountability has intensified those questions. The Institute for Educational Leadership (2000), after citing a long list of the principal's traditional managerial responsibilities, went on to add:

Principals today must also serve as leaders for student learning. They must know academic content and pedagogical techniques. They must work with teachers to strengthen skills. They must collect, analyze and use data in ways that fuel excellence. They must rally students, teachers, parents, local health and family service agencies, youth development groups, local businesses and other community residents and partners around the common goal of raising student performance. And they must have the leadership skills and knowledge to exercise the autonomy and authority to pursue these strategies.

Determining the principal's role is not just an abstract exercise. If schools lack clarity and consensus about the principal's mission, they may simply add new duties to an already extensive list, creating job overload. Van Cooley and Jianping Shen (2003) found that secondary principals reported they were engaged in new roles that had simply been "layered" over the old job. That is, instead of replacing former responsibilities or being integrated into the job, the new duties were simply added to what was already there.

Already, some observers have suggested that the job may have become impossible for all but a few "superleaders" (J. Casey Hurley 2001, Ronald DiPaola and Megan Tschannen-Moran 2003). Moreover, the perceived workload may discourage talented educators from accepting the leadership challenge, diminishing the pool of qualified candidates (Diana Pounder and Randall Merrill 2001).

The multiplicity of demands also creates role conflict. Surveys persistently find that principals feel torn between the instructional leadership that almost everyone agrees should be the top priority and the daily management chores that are almost impossible to ignore; often, the managerial responsibilities seem to take precedence (Cooley and Shen; Rebecca Goodwin and colleagues 2003; Tak Cheung Chan and Harbison Pool 2002; Diane Ricciardi and Joseph Petrosko 2001; Karen Osterman and colleagues 1997).

Defining School Leadership

In a standards-oriented age, contemporary visions of leadership can easily be found in the professional standards established by policymakers, practitioners, and university professors. Foremost among these are the guidelines developed by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), which have gained rapid acceptance. The six key themes are as follows:

- facilitating shared vision
- sustaining a school culture conducive to student and staff learning
- managing the organization for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment
- collaborating with families and community members
- acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner
- influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context

The standards, now used to guide principal preparation programs in at least thirty-five states, envision these six dimensions as pathways to one overriding goal—student achievement (Council of Chief State School Officers 1996).

Similarly, NAESP's recent guide to professional development for principals emphasizes the leader's role in creating a dynamic learning community by giving the highest priority to student and adult learning, setting high expectations, demanding content and instruction that ensure student achievement, creating a culture of continuous learning for adults, using data to guide improvement, and actively engaging the community (National Association of Elementary School Principals 2001).

The ISLLC and NAESP standards represent a "best-practice" approach based on the judgment of experienced practitioners and knowledgeable observers. Is there research evidence to support this view of the leader's role? While these guidelines have been in place for too short a time to provide much direct evidence, a recent major review of the literature by Kenneth Leithwood and Carolyn Riehl (2003) identified a number of "core practices" that seem consistent with the standards:

- Setting directions, which includes identifying and articulating a vision, fostering the acceptance of group goals, and creating high performance expectations.
- Developing people, which involves offering intellectual stimulation, providing individualized support, and providing an appropriate model.
- Redesigning the organization, which includes strengthening school cultures, modifying organizational structures, and building collaborative processes.

Beyond these core roles (which are probably similar to leadership roles in many other types of organizations), Leithwood and Riehl note that the current education-reform environment may require principals to carry out several roles that are specifically related to accountability.

- creating and sustaining a competitive school (market accountability)
- empowering others to make significant decisions (decentralization accountability)

- providing instructional leadership (professional accountability)
- developing and executing strategic plans (management accountability)

Finally Leithwood and Riehl note that many successful leaders are proactive in promoting school quality, equity, and social justice.

Admittedly, it may be misleading to speak of "the" role of the principal. Kenneth Leithwood and Daniel Duke (1999), examining all articles on educational leadership published in four major administration journals from 1985 to 1995, identified six distinct conceptions of leadership: instructional (influencing the work of teachers in a way that will improve student achievement), transformational (increasing the commitments and capacities of school staff), moral (influencing others by appealing to notions of right and wrong), participative (involving other members of the school community), managerial (operating the school efficiently), and contingent (adapting their behavior to fit the situation). They suggested that each conception reflects a different emphasis that should be viewed in terms of the connections among leaders, followers, organizations, and the outside environment.

In addition, as schools vary, so may leadership practices. For example, while virtually all principals accept instructional leadership as a major responsibility, those in larger schools may take more of a coordinating or strategic role while their counterparts in small schools exercise more of a hands-on approach (Bradley Portin 2001). Nonetheless, school leaders in all settings face common challenges in meeting expectations:

- Providing focused instructional leadership
- Leading change
- Developing a collaborative leadership structure
- Providing the moral center

Providing Focused Instructional Leadership

Since the 1980s, instructional leadership has dominated discussions of the principal's role, creating almost unanimous agreement that student learning should be at the center of what principals do. Surprisingly, however, researchers and practitioners have yet to settle on an explicit definition of the term. The earliest discussions were fairly straightforward, stating that instructional leaders set high academic expectations, reviewed lesson plans, supervised classroom instruction, and monitored curriculum. In the past decade, the term has expanded to the point that some simply define it as "anything that leaders do to improve teaching and learning" (Deborah King 2002).

Thus, while there is almost unanimous agreement on the importance of instructional leadership, it remains a loosely-constructed paradigm lacking a clearly articulated theoretical foundation. Commonly cited elements include a coherent instructional vision, rigorous standards, use of data to make decisions, emphasis on professional development, the creation of learning communities, and the clear demonstration—through behavior as well as words—that the principal is fully engaged with classroom instruction (Jonathan Supovitz and Susan Poglinco 2001; NAESP; King). Others point out that even the more mundane managerial aspects of the job can have an instructional impact (Norma Mertz and Sonja McNeely 2001). In addition, Richard Du Four (2002) reflects the influence of standards-based accountability when he

describes the shift from watching what teachers are doing to paying attention to what students are learning.

While the earliest descriptions of instructional leadership seemed to highlight the direct effect of the principal's traits and actions, more recent views have focused increasingly on indirect influences. Philip Hallinger and Ronald Heck (1996), after reviewing a decade-and-a-half of research on instructional leadership, found evidence that principals' impact on student learning came mainly through influencing contextual factors such as policy formation, goal development, and teachers' practices.

More recently, some analysts have challenged the widespread assumption that principals need to have teaching experience and a deep knowledge of instruction. Instead, they assert that generic leadership qualities such as energy, resourcefulness, focus, and political savvy are more important than specialized knowledge of instruction and that anyone with a bachelor's degree, knowledge of educational regulations, and the ability to pass a background check should be eligible for the principalship (Broad Foundation 2003). Advocates of this view believe the principal can exercise instructional leadership by presiding over a team of staff members who do have instructional expertise (Frederick Hess 2003).

These claims, which are based in part on skepticism about traditional certification requirements, are difficult to assess, since so few principals lack teaching experience. On the one hand, there is no guarantee that teaching experience alone creates instructional expertise or that teaching expertise is accompanied by the ability to share it with others. On the other hand, many school reformers have emphasized the need for leaders to have a deep understanding of instructional dynamics. Kate Jamentz (2002) notes that simply having a list of essential teaching skills is not enough. "Instructional leaders must internalize exemplars of effective classroom practice so that they can make accurate judgments about, and give useful feedback to, the teachers with whom they work." At the moment, most practitioners seem to regard their classroom background as a crucial qualification; over 90 percent of elementary principals surveyed by NAESP consider their teaching experience to be of great value in carrying out their duties (James Doud and Edward Keller 2000).

Leading Change

No Child Left Behind has solidified one emerging trend: school leaders are change agents. Encouraging innovation has always been a part of the job description, but until recently the goal was modest incremental change that could be integrated into the existing system. Today the system itself is the target of reform.

The task is formidable. Systemic change is not well understood, even by experts, and school leaders have had little training to prepare them for the challenge. Moreover, the reform movement does not present leaders with a coherent, fully aligned vision for change. For example, No Child Left Behind is a blend of standards-based accountability, educational choice, and old-fashioned bureaucratic mandates, not all of which work together harmoniously. Even as principals try to stay focused on improving instruction, they have to contend with very exacting requirements about teacher qualifications and the right of students to transfer schools.

Because school reform is a complex multilayered process, singling out the principal's contributions is no simple process. However, researchers and analysts have begun to tease out the ways that a leader's actions can boost school improvement efforts.

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A research review by the Southern Regional Education Board (Gary Hoachlander and colleagues 2001) identified six broad strategies associated with positive results:

- raising expectations and academic rigor for all students
- increasing student engagement through better instruction and added support services
- providing focused, sustained professional development
- managing the organization to support student learning
- building relationships with parents, employers, and the community
- guiding reform through assessment and data analysis

In another review, Joseph Murphy and Amanda Datnow (2003) concluded that principals were crucial to the success of comprehensive school reforms by carrying out several key functions:

- serving as gatekeepers by signaling their acceptance and strong support of reform efforts
- supporting the reform by locating resources and buffering reform efforts from external distractions
- nurturing teacher involvement and leadership

Neither of these reviews was designed to be comprehensive, and considerably more research will be required before such broad generalizations can be refined into reliable roadmaps for leaders. Hoachlander and colleagues noted that no single technique was likely to have much impact, adding that "the ability to blend many practices into a balanced, well-managed package of school improvement" was an essential leadership requirement. Murphy and Datnow also suggested that principals often seemed to maintain meaningfulness in the process, acting to "weave the threads of coherence throughout the school and the reform work."

Developing a Collaborative Leadership Structure

A seeming paradox for principals is that increased demand for results has been accompanied by the expectation that leaders should operate collaboratively. While sharing decisions and developing leadership in others may be attractive to some beleaguered principals, it also creates ambiguity about authority and accountability. The staggering demands of reform seem to call for energetic take-charge strategies; success stories typically focus on principals and superintendents who came in and "turned things around." Yet recent research on school improvement has emphasized the importance of creating collaborative learning communities.

Murphy and Datnow found that successful principals in comprehensive school reform build "dense leadership organizations" by sharpening their own collaborative skills, developing teacher leadership, finding resources to support the growth of professional community, giving teachers the confidence to grow, and managing the leadership agenda systemically. A variety of other empirical studies and research syntheses have likewise concluded that collaborative communities play a key role in school improvement (for example, Supovitz and Poglinco; Jay Scribner and colleagues 1999; Joy Phillips 2003; Leithwood and Riehl; Jamentz). Leithwood and Riehl note that a sense of community may partly rest on structural factors such as school size that are not within the principal's control, but they also emphasize that a focus on community promotes coherence of the instructional program and stimulates growth in teachers.

What Murphy and Datnow call "dense leadership" is more commonly known as "distributed leadership." While the term is sometimes used to describe a kind of job sharing in which the principal's current duties are parceled out to other administrators or teachers, it more typically views leadership as inherently a social activity woven into the threads of the organization. This leadership can be exercised by different people at different times in different ways (James Spillane and colleagues 2001; Richard Elmore 2000). By virtue of their strategic position, principals must not only carry out their own assigned duties, but must develop leadership capacity in teachers and others who are not necessarily accustomed to thinking and acting as leaders.

Providing the Moral Center

Moral leadership has been a persistent theme in recent debates over the principal's role (Leithwood and Duke). While conceptions of the leader's responsibility differ widely, most discussions have centered not on the need for personal ethical behavior (which is usually assumed), but on the importance of creating schools that serve moral purposes.

Joseph Murphy (2001) has argued that progress in school leadership requires greater attention to "valued ends." He offers three lines of development:

- Moral stewardship (leaders keep the organization focused on core values of justice, fairness, and community)
- Educator (leaders keep the organization focused on its core task of instructing and educating the next generation)
- Community builder (leaders nurture the life of the school by creating open access to parents and citizens, as well as by creating communities of learning within the school).

At a time when American schools are becoming increasingly diverse, Myrna Gantner and colleagues (2000) have called attention to the importance of listening to the voices of teachers, parents, and students whose concerns are sometimes drowned out by the "experts." Their case study of a Texas school documented the principal's impact on school climate through promoting democratic participation, creating an inviting culture, building meaningful relationships, and acting ethically.

Stephen Gross and Joan Shapiro (2002) took a similar position in arguing that leaders must balance accountability (legal obligations) against responsibility (concern for people). They documented leadership behaviors that helped teachers negotiate the demands of heightened accountability by protecting what was good in the current curriculum and treating teacher concerns with respect and caring.

Many of these themes have been captured by Thomas Sergiovanni (2000) in his argument that principals should protect and enhance the "lifeworld" of schools. The *lifeworld* consists of the values, beliefs, and purposes that knit the school community together and give significance to everyday activities. The *systemsworld* is concerned with the technical methods by which those purposes are carried out. Both domains are necessary, but healthy schools are those in which the lifeworld drives the systemsworld. When the reverse is true--when the means dominate the ends--schools become dysfunctional. By continually raising questions about purpose, institutionalizing shared values, and motivating others by example, leaders establish a "moral voice" that infuses the school community.

Responding to the Challenges

The most instinctive response to the new challenges is simply to work harder. Most school leaders have clearly done this, but may be reaching the point of diminishing returns. Sooner or later, untamed workloads result in declining morale and dimmed enthusiasm. In addition, just trying harder may not help leaders who are confronting issues for which they have not been trained (and for which there are no clear answers). The list includes sexual harassment of students; guns in school; use of technology; demographic shifts; more rigorous academic standards (especially No Child Left Behind); and integration of special-needs students into regular classrooms.

By necessity, then, today's leaders must define themselves as learners, not just doers, constantly scanning the environment for new ideas, tools, and solutions, and reflecting on the implications. Linda Lambert (2002) argues that this search for learning is becoming a "dominant narrative" for school leaders:

Today, leaders attend to the learning of all members of the educational community. Together, they explore current practice, beliefs, and assumptions that serve as a basis for posing inquiry questions. These questions are the signposts in the hunt for evidence and the struggle with dissonance. Dissonance is tackled in dialogue, thereby lowering defenses and increasing shared understanding. This journey results in new approaches to student and adult learning, internal school accountability and shared responsibility, and a commitment to the decisions made for school improvement.

Links

http://www.naesp.org/ National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) is a major source of information on the status, conditions, and concerns of elementary school principals.

http://www.nassp.org/ National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) is a major source of information on the status, conditions, and concerns of secondary school principals.

http://www.aasa.org/ The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) frequently deals with the role of the principal from the perspective of the district office.

http://www.sreb.org/ The Southern Regional Education Board frequently reports on the role of school leaders and related issues.

http://www.mcrel.org/ Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning frequently reports on leadership issues.

http://www.ecs.org/ Education Commission of the States tracks research and policy on school leadership and other educational issues.

Several groups are conducting or funding research on the role of school leaders:

- http://aera.net/ (American Educational Research Association, Division A)
- http://www.crpe.org/ (Center on Reinventing Public Education)
- http://www.wallacefunds.org/ (Wallace Funds)
- http://depts.washington.edu/ctpmail/ (The Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy)

Several policy or advocacy groups have issued recent reports on the role of school leaders:

- http://www.iel.org/ (Institute for Educational Leadership)
- http://www.nasbe.org/ (National Association of State Boards of Education)
- http://www.broadfoundation.org/ (The Broad Foundation)

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